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Jack Anderson

The Decline, but Not Fall, of the Ethnic Russians

A little-noticed fact of life in the Soviet Union is causing concern in the Kremlin and corresponding satisfaction in Western intelligence circles: the Russians are about to become a minority within their own vast empire.

Most Americans tend to use the terms Soviet Union and Russia interchangeably—often to the intense irritation of the nationalistic people of the Ukraine, the Baltic states and other Soviet "republics" who consider their homelands captive nations occupied and oppressed by Russian overlords.

The fact is, of course, that while the Russian Soviet republic constitutes about three-fourths of the Soviet Union's area, ethnic Great Russians make up a bare 50 percent of the population. And in a few years, according to the Kremlin's own demographers, Great Russians will make up only about 46 percent of the population.

No one expects the diverse non-Russian elements to unite and throw off the Russian-dominated government and party apparatus. They are too widely separated, both by geography and culture, and the Russians will still be overwhelmingly the single largest ethnic group in the Soviet Union for the foreseeable future.

But the rapidly growing non-Russian population, and the largely static Russian numbers, are an increasing headache for the Kremlin, particularly in the military forces. A secret CIA report notes that the Red Army is already at least 52 percent non-Russian, and the disparity will only increase with time.

In practical terms, this poses a staggering problem of operational command. Another intelligence report points out that there are some 125 distinct nationalities in the Soviet armed forces, using a total of at least 50 languages. Simple commands in Russian are often the only Russian words the minority soldiers can understand.

The fastest-growing populations in the Soviet Union are in the Asiatic republics of Moslem background. A Defense Intelligence Agency analysis of the Soviet Union's population—seen by my associate Dale Van Atta—estimates that, by 1985, "the Russian component is likely to decline by about 2 million, while the population of the eight Moslem republics and autonomous regions in the southern U.S.S.R.

will probably rise by 9 million." Moscow's occasional census figures support the DIA's predictions.

Exactly what effect the changing ethnic composition of the Soviet Union will bring is uncertain, according to a secret Pentagon report. But the unpleasant fact is that, from the earliest days of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russians held minority groups in an iron grip that is unlikely to be weakened significantly by the growing ethnic populations.

The resources of a modern police state are used to abort any ethnic or religious restiveness among the thriving Moslem population. Religious devotion is officially discouraged throughout the Soviet Union, and perhaps fewer than half the 40-plus million Moslems actually practice their

faith. Of an estimated 24,000 mosques in the old Russian Empire, only about 240 remain in use today.

Any stirrings of solidarity with Moslems across the Soviet borders appear unlikely. The Kremlin's aggression in Afghanistan has simply been blacked out or misrepresented by the state-controlled media in the Moslem regions. And the surge of fundamentalist Shiite fervor has been withheld from Soviet Moslems.

In short, intelligence analysts hold out no rosy hopes that the changing population picture will cause the Kremlin to crumble or the Soviet Union to fly apart. But it's a continuing headache for Soviet leaders, and thus cause for mild rejoicing among Cold Warriors.

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